

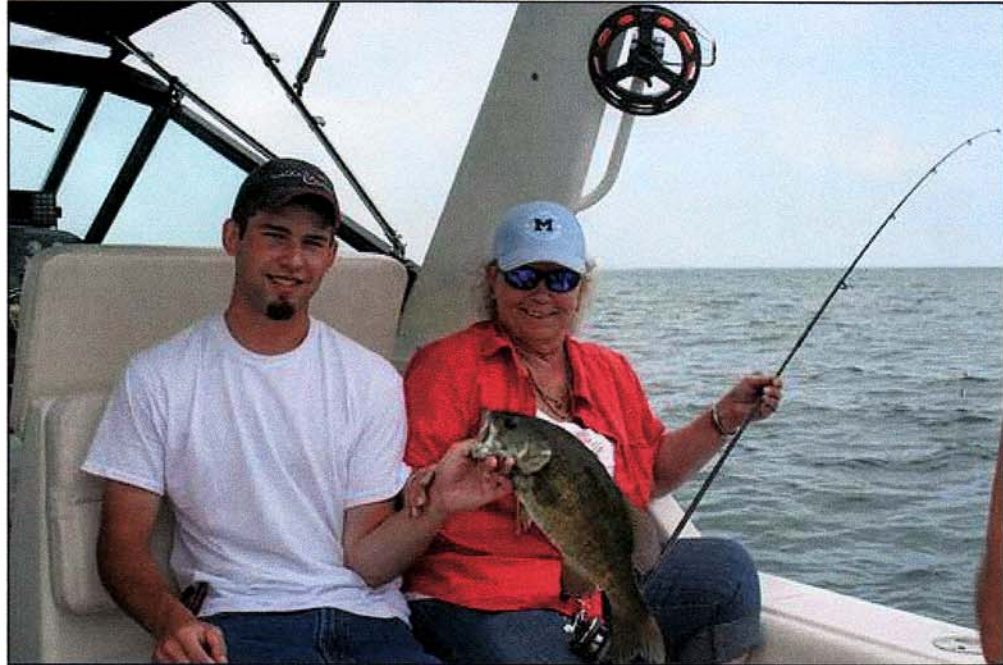
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Tuesday, August 01, 2006

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Dan Koss of Algonac helps Virginia Hamilton of Grosse Pointe Woods land a 4-pound smallmouth bass. Koss is Ray Novack's first mate.

Susie Hodges / Special to The Detroit News

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The Great Outdoors

Reel gamer

Smallmouth bass on Lake St. Clair will put up a fight

Lynn Henning / The Detroit News

From a pure boater's perspective, it was a fine morning to be on Lake St. Clair: balmy, fairly calm, with a post-dawn sun just beginning to slice through smoke-colored clouds.

The question was whether the smallmouth bass on Lake St. Clair were as enthused as the boat passengers about this particular Friday in late July. Thunderstorms had rolled across Metro Detroit the previous night, and Friday's forecast was dicey.

"I'd rather fish smallmouths during a cold front and a high barometer than after thunderstorms," said Ray Novack, 58, from St. Clair Shores.

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Susie Hodges / Special to The Detroit News
Ray Novack, owner of Ray's Sportfishing

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Novack is owner of Ray's Sportfishing Services, which was in charge of putting a five-person party into the thick of Lake St. Clair's famed smallmouth bass waters.

"Bass are like dogs," he said. "The thunder kind of scares 'em."

Novack pushed his 31-foot Tiera across waves and chops, aimed toward the lake's southwest Canadian-side quadrant. The idea was to drift-fish across strategic areas of the Belle River Hump, a popular tract where bass tend to lurk in holes and shoals, waiting for a nice, fat minnow to swim by -- your basic Big Mac for predator fish like smallmouth bass.

Digits on Novack's depth-gauge hovered in the 14-foot range while his fish-locator showed the occasional large fish, as well as schools of minnows swimming through the warming summer water.

"We've got structure on top of structure," Novack said, pleased, as he stopped the boat's twin engines and, with the help of first mate, Dan Koss, 19, of Algonac, tossed out the party's five lines.

Tackle set-ups were standard: bait-casting rigs loaded with 20-pound-test line. A three-way swivel was tied with an 18-24-inch drop and a 4-foot lead to a No. 6 hook threaded through the lips of live spot-tail minnows, all of it weighted down with a 2-ounce sinker.

It was 7:30 a.m. when the first bait fish hit the water, and probably 7:32 when the first of the morning's smallmouth ended up in Koss' net: a respectable 2-pounder that was quickly joined in the live well by another 2-pounder.

Heavy fishing

The party of five included Wayne Newman of Clawson and Joe White of Shelby Township. They were hosting Joe Starski of Warren, Virginia Hamilton of Grosse Pointe Woods and Tom Jakubiec of Dearborn Heights.

Smallmouth fishing on Lake St. Clair is regarded by some anglers as outstanding, barely behind the lake's reputation for muskies. Walleye, of course, tend to be a favorite, as well, but not during summer days on Lake St. Clair. That's when warmer water sends hordes of walleye scattering to Lake Erie, or induces them to feed more at night, in clearer water that during daytime is more easily penetrated by sunlight as zebra mussels continue with their filtering effects.

Just as clear, by 9 a.m., were Novack's fears about the weather and its impact on the bass.

"They just don't want to eat," he said. "We've been on top of fish all day long, and they just don't want to bite."

Services, says smallmouth filets are best prepared in a microwave oven with butter, garlic, salt and onions. [See full image](#)

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Susie Hodges / Special to The Detroit News

Joe Starski of Warren shows off the 4 1/2 - pound smallmouth bass he caught last week on Lake St. Clair. The excursion was a success, despite passing storms. Said captain Ray Novack, "Bass are like dogs. The thunder kind of scares 'em." [See full image](#)

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A light wind from the west was making it tough to stay on course. Novack had hoped to use an outboard as a steadying engine that would keep the boat above the Belle River Hump's hot spots, but wind and waves were stubborn.

He instead drifted across the target terrain before firing his engines for a repeat pass.

By 10 a.m., things picked up. Two 2 1/2 -pounders were taken almost simultaneously, and then three smallmouth were tussling with the anglers as Koss scrambled with his net to land one of the toughest little game fish in North America.

A half-hour later, Hamilton was wrestling with a heavier smallmouth that was giving her the morning's best and longest scrap. Koss finally scooped an 18-inch smallmouth that weighed 4 pounds.

Ten minutes later, it was Starski's turn. He was battling a smallmouth that dived and whirled and fought like a freshwater wildcat. Koss got the net onto a dark-green, 19-inch smallmouth that weighed 4 1/2 pounds.

"When they get a fish on, I feel like I'm catching it," said Novack, who has been operating Lake St. Clair charter boats since 1985.

"I just like trying to figure 'em out and outsmarting them."

Changing tide

Like most students of Lake St. Clair, Novack marvels at the lake's productivity -- its ability to feed and support so many game fish, and so many species, despite the angling pressure.

"Twelve years ago, fishing this hump, I'd be out here all by myself," Novack said, speaking of how smallmouth fishing has changed. "Now, you'll see 30 or 40 boats out here fishing for smallmouth.

"There seems to be a bass tournament on the lake every evening and every weekend."

By 11:45, the group had its limit and headed for the dock. Novack would spend the next 30 minutes turning the smallmouth into filets he -- and a growing number of Lake St. Clair anglers -- believes are best-prepared in a microwave oven after the filets have been coated in butter, garlic, salt and onions.

The fishing party was all for Novack's recipe. Eating, after all, is the only thing almost as good as catching one of a Great Lake's most gratifying game fish.

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